Meulenbeld, Mark R.E.: *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, 273 pp., ISBN 978-0-8248-3844-7.

Reviewed by **Philip Clart,** Sinologie, Universität Leipzig, Schillerstr. 6, Leipzig D-04109, Germany. E-mail: clart@uni-leipzig.de

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0011

This important new work puts forth arguments concerning primarily three subjects: the novel *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 (Canonization of the Gods), the cultural context of the Ming vernacular novel, and the relationship of Daoism and popular religion. The *Fengshen yanyi* serves as the case-study through which Meulenbeld develops his arguments on the latter two issues; as a reviewer I applaud this long-overdue study of an important, though hitherto neglected narrative text of the Ming period, but have some reservations when it comes to the extension of the insights drawn from this case-study to the wider field of Chinese religions.

The *Fengshen yanyi* has not received much critical attention in post-nineteenth-century scholarship in spite of its wide spread and popularity among readers in late Imperial China. In chapter 1 ("Invention of the Novel"), Mark Meulenbeld convincingly traces this neglect to the development of "literature" as a field of academic inquiry *sui generis*, i. e., as subject matter to be examined primarily in aesthetic terms as authorial creation. When applied to the vernacular novel in Ming and Qing times, this agenda led scholars to separate novels from their cultural context and focus instead on the aesthetic qualities of the texts themselves, understood and evaluated as "conscious fictions" (*yishi zhi chuangzao* 意識之創造) and "individual creations" (*duchuang* 獨創), in the influential phrasing of Lu Xun 魯迅 (p. 44). This perspective led to the canonization of a handful of "masterworks" such as *The Journey to the West* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, whose literary interpretation was largely isolated from their extra-textual context. In the case of *Journey to the West* as a religiously-themed novel, this meant that the rich religious content had to be reread metaphorically as addressing the human condition more generally rather than remaining tied to a surrounding religious culture that would limit the possible readings of this declared masterpiece. Having its roots in the age of Chinese modernization, Meulenbeld argues, the modern discipline of literary studies presupposed a secular (or even secularist) outlook that could appreciate novels of the late Imperial period only if their religious elements could be sublimated

by means of symbolic or metaphoric readings; works not amenable to such readings were regarded as being of low quality. Furthermore, a secularist perspective implied that the religious subject matter, being obviously ("scientifically") untrue, must also be "conscious fiction", albeit in the case of novels like the *Fengshen yanyi* of a less savoury type, namely, exaggerated phantasies and lies playing on popular superstitions. Meulenbeld rightly rejects the anachronism and ideological bias of this viewpoint and insists instead on reading Chinese novels as part of the cultural whole in the midst of which they emerged. The *Fengshen yanyi* is, of course, a grateful candidate for such a contextualized reading, as its impact on the Chinese religious imagination has long been recognized by folklorists and students of Chinese religions. However, Meulenbeld's analysis goes far beyond the conventional view of narratives like the *Fengshen yanyi* serving as repertoires of stories and figures that are then taken up in local religious practices, local operas, and folk art. His core argument in this book is that the *Fengshen yanyi* itself is the product of a religious culture and only to be understood as such. The culture in question is thunder ritual (*leifa* 雷法), a complex of exorcistic rites based on the premise of conquering demons and then pressing them into the service of the ritualist against other demonic beings. Two ritual compendia, the *Daofa huiyuan* 道法會元 (Unified Origins of the Dao and Its Rituals) and *Fahai yizhu* 法海遺珠 (Forgotten Gems from the Sea of Rituals), contain thunder ritual texts from the Southern Song to the early Ming, i. e., significantly preceding the *Fengshen yanyi*, which was first printed only around 1625. Not only do these ritual texts contain most of the *Fengshen yanyi*'s protagonists as ritual agents, the sequential structure of the rites foreshadows the novel's plot as a struggle between two forces ending in the canonization (bestowal of divine titles and ranks) of all demons and spirits involved. Therefore Meulenbeld argues that the novel is fundamentally a narrative elaboration of thunder rituals in that it both explains the provenance of their demonic agents and replicates in its plot the ritual structure. This interpretation is convincingly argued and documented, and should encourage us to revisit at least some late Imperial Chinese novels with a view towards re-conceptualizing them in relation to their religious contexts. Readings of the *Journey to the West* as based on an inner-alchemical (*neidan* 內丹) structural and procedural blueprint have already been offered in recent years and hold out the promise of exciting new discoveries to be made by a retooled literary analysis.

If *Fengshen yanyi* is closely tied to a type of ritual text and ritual performance, what can we learn from it and its wider context about the religious culture of Ming China? Meulenbeld follows up on this question by addressing the role of thunder rituals in the Ming dynasty with regard to their role in local

communities (chapter 3) and on the national level (chapter 4). He argues that thunder rituals are a key area where Daoism furnished models, procedures, and structures that informed local understandings of the spirit world, shaped institutions of local self-defence (such as militias), and integrated local communities into translocal and transregional networks headed by temples to the Emperor of the Eastern Peak (Dongyue Dadi 東嶽大帝). This ordering and integrating functionality of thunder rituals accounts for early Ming imperial reliance on and patronage of Daoist ritual specialists, who integrated the state cult shrines for the city gods and altars for baleful spirits (*litan* 厲壇) into the same hierarchies, with temples of the Emperor of the Eastern Peak as the key higher-order node. In short, Daoist liturgical networks are seen to be connecting and integrating state cult and popular religion into a larger cultural system at local, regional, and national levels. Daoism thus emerges as the cultural glue that held Ming society together. Meulenbeld here enters a long-standing debate about the relative autonomy of cultural subsystems in late Imperial China, in particular that of popular religion. He is clearly in favour of a view that accords Daoism a pivotal function in the cultural integration of late Imperial society and is critical of the notion of popular religion as a religious system with norms, notions, and procedures of its own, employing Daoist and Buddhist religious specialists only on its own terms. He accuses "theories that make categorical distinctions between popular religion and institutionalized religion" of "ideological bias", tracing their championship of the "ordinary people" to "Marxist notions of class difference and perhaps modern democratic tastes" (pp. 17–18). By contrast, Meulenbeld sides with Kristofer Schipper and others in regarding local communities in south and southeast China (the regions he limits his claims to) as connected into larger networks by means of Daoist ritual (see his discussion on pp. 17–23). Here I beg to disagree to the extent that this becomes a generalized claim of Daoist hegemony in and over popular religion, reducing the latter to a passive sphere without agency or originality. Pushed to the extreme, this view would completely absorb popular religion into Daoism if it were not for the nagging awareness that it still maintains some kind of separate presence. Meulenbeld is somewhat at a loss as to how to refer to that presence, usually still using the term "popular religion", often (though not always) qualified by being placed within quotation marks or called into question by the attribute "so-called". Other terminology includes "local religion" (p. 17), "common Chinese theology" (p. 67), "the mongrel world of local religious diversity" (p. 68), and "the nameless elements of popular religion" (pp. 116–117). If popular religion is indeed a mongrel hodgepodge of nameless elements, then surely it makes sense that "the relational framework of the novel would offer a unified vision for the population at large who otherwise are not acquainted with systematic visions of

their socioreligious environment" (p. 169), doesn't it? I do not question Meulenbeld's findings of the important role played by thunder rituals and their specialists in shaping the ways local communities in the Jiangnan region, and perhaps more widely in southern China, interacted with the world beyond their immediate borders, be that by the organization of local militias or by visits to higher-order temples of the Eastern Peak. However, this is a very partial (in both meanings of the word) view of the religious landscape of late Imperial Jiangnan. We have numerous studies of other aspects of local religious life in this area and time period, which provide quite different perspectives, for example, the spread of lay Buddhism and elite patronage for Buddhist monasteries in the late Ming, or the activities of organized popular religious movements such as the Non-Action Teachings (Wuweijiao 無為教) studied by Barend J. ter Haar in another book published by University of Hawai'i Press shortly before Meulenbeld's work.[1] We also have Taiwan-based ethnographic studies of the management of religious diversity at the local level, which demonstrate a much more complex—and more interesting and challenging—picture than that provided by Dao-centric or any other reductionism.[2] In short, it is my considered opinion that Mark Meulenbeld's study adds an important piece of the puzzle of local and regional religious life in late Imperial Jiangnan, but it is not a piece that rearranges the whole picture.

Before concluding this review, let me briefly address some minor points. Missing from the bibliography are a couple of earlier monographs on the *Fengshen yanyi*, the one by Zeng Qinliang even specifically addressing its relationship with popular religion.[3] Since the existing scholarship on the *Fengshen yanyi* is not unmanageable in scope, one would have expected at least a brief discussion of these predecessors.

Meulenbeld's style is excellent throughout and the copy-editing meticulous, making this a highly readable and closely argued book. My only criticism in this regard extends to the concept of "Five Quarters". Usually, the Chinese term *wufang* 五方 is rendered as "five directions", which in my view is a perfectly serviceable translation. "Five Quarters", by contrast, is as etymologically jarring as a trilogy in four parts or a duet for three voices.

Having commended the publisher's careful copy-editing, I should add praise for the beautifully designed cover jacket and overall appearance of the book.

2 Jordan 1976; Weller 1987.

3 Zeng 1985; Li 2011.

3 Zeng 1985; Li 2011.

However, it is a pity that the book uses endnotes instead of footnotes and provides no in-line Chinese characters. Both these features force the reader to do a lot of back-and-forth checking in the endnotes and the Chinese character glossary. While endnotes unfortunately have become standard for most publishers, University of Hawai'i Press books often do provide in-line Chinese characters, so I wonder why this enlightened (and technically not overly cumbersome) option was not chosen here.

To sum up, this is an important work that should be read by all students of Chinese literature and Chinese religions. For the study of the Chinese novel it provides a convincingly presented argument against literary reductionism and for a contextualized reading of late Imperial Chinese literature. When it comes to Chinese religions, it itself runs the risk of reductionism by over-generalizing its findings; in and of themselves these findings are very valuable for our understanding of local religious life in late Imperial Jiangnan, but their empirical shoulders are perhaps too narrow to carry the weight of Meulenbeld's more general argument about the Daoist domination of popular religion.

Bibliography

Jordan, David K. (1976): "The Jiaw of Shigaang (Taiwan): An Essay in Folk Interpretation". *Asian Folklore Studies* 35.2: 81–107.

Li Aihong 李愛紅 (2011): Fengshen yanyi *de yishu xiangxiang yu jingdianhua yanjiu* 《封神演義》的藝術想像與經典化研究. Ji'nan: Qilu Shushe.

ter Haar, Barend J. (2014): *Practicing Scripture: A Lay Buddhist Movement in Late Imperial China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Weller, Robert P. (1987): *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Zeng Qinliang 曾勤良 (1985): *Taiwan minjian xinyang yu* Fengshen yanyi *zhi bijiao yanjiu* 臺灣民間信仰與封神演義之比較研究 (2nd rev. ed.). Taipei: Huazheng Shuju.